

# ANTI-FASCISM IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

## Transnational Networks, Exile Communities, and Radical Internationalism

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## Chapter 10

'Aid the victims of German fascism!': Transatlantic networks  
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# 10

## 'AID THE VICTIMS OF GERMAN FASCISM!'

### Transatlantic networks and the rise of anti-Nazism in the USA, 1933–1935

*Kasper Braskén*

Anti-fascism became one of the main causes of the American left-liberal milieu during the mid-1930s.<sup>1</sup> However, when looking back at the early 1930s, it seems unclear as to how this general awareness initially came about, and what kind of transatlantic exchanges of information and experiences formed the basis of a rising anti-fascist consensus in the US. Research has tended to focus on the latter half of the 1930s, which is mainly concerned with the Communist International's (Comintern) so-called popular front period. Major themes have included anti-fascist responses to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the strongly felt solidarity with the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), or the slow turn from an 'anti-interventionist' to an 'interventionist/internationalist' position during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to investigate two communist-led, international organisations that enabled the creation of new transatlantic, anti-fascist solidarity networks only months after Hitler's rise to power in January 1933. They were called the World Committee against War and Fascism and the World Relief Committee for the Victims of German Fascism. Both organisations were established in Paris in 1933 and they quickly formed separate US sections known as the American League against War and Fascism (American League, or ALAWF) and the National Committee to Aid the Victims of German Fascism (National Committee) respectively. During the 1930s the American League would become the largest anti-fascist organisation in the US. However, besides Nigel Copsey's and Christopher Vials's most recent studies on the subject, the American League has remained largely under-researched. Meanwhile, the National Committee has been almost completely overlooked in previous research, although I will argue here that it played a profound role in the shaping of transatlantic and US anti-fascism.<sup>3</sup> Rather than offering a general history of these two anti-fascist organisations, I will focus on the connections between American anti-fascists and German, British and French

anti-fascists established through these organisations from 1933 to 1935. This will provide new insights to the ways anti-fascist ideas and practices were circulated, but it also reveals how frictions between these transnational efforts and the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) became a veritable obstacle for the formation of a broader anti-fascist consensus in the US. The chapter is based on archival research in the Comintern archives in Moscow and supplemented by new findings from the German Federal Archives, the German Foreign Ministry Archives, the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, the Tamiment Library in New York, and the Swarthmore College Peace Collection in Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup>

Although the fight against international fascism was the main concern of these organisations, it is important to remember that they were created in the concluding phase of the Comintern's sectarian class-against-class line. This line had been established in 1928/1929 and declared unequivocally that social democracy was the main enemy of the communist movement. The Comintern's slow turn to the anti-fascist popular front period commenced in late 1934 but did not become its official line until August 1935. In practice, the period under investigation contained a number of internal contradictions and tensions as, on the one hand, the CPUSA continued pushing uncompromising, sectarian politics and enhanced their attacks against social democracy. On the other, the newly established communist-led global networks of anti-war and anti-fascist committees advocated the creation of broader united front initiatives and solidarity campaigns. While the former indulged only in united fronts 'from below' with workers of various left-liberal orientation, the latter welcomed co-operation with socialist politicians and intellectuals years before the Comintern's official turn to Popular front politics.<sup>5</sup> The chapter can be seen as a contribution to a growing field of research on transatlantic anti-fascism, but it clearly differs from the recent work of Michael Seidman whose study is focused on the years between 1936 and 1945 and as a result completely overlooks the role of such international anti-fascist organisations in the formation of transatlantic anti-fascism on the civil society level.<sup>6</sup>

Although anti-fascism had already become a major concern during the 1920s among Italian radical migrants in the US (see e.g. Chapter 1, this volume),<sup>7</sup> transatlantic anti-fascist connections significantly intensified as a consequence of the rise of Nazi Germany. They were also significantly diversified as German, British, French and American anti-fascist activists took an increasingly important role on the global stage. Moreover, the establishment of the Third Reich resulted in an unprecedented cultural and political exile from Germany and led to a dramatic restructuring of the transnational anti-fascist movement in Europe and the Americas. Hitler had used the democratic system to undermine democracy itself, but it was with the burning of the Reichstag (the German parliamentary building) on 27 February 1933 that a pretext to unleash an unprecedented wave of terror and repression against the communist and socialist movements in Germany was provided. It is vital to keep in mind that the Nazi seizure of power did not result in a moment of united broad resistance in Germany, but delivered instead a cataclysmic defeat to Europe's most powerful Marxist parties and trade unions. If the

possibilities for resistance inside Nazi Germany seemed hopeless, the global popular struggle against Nazi Germany, connected to the fight against every form of fascism, offered much more promise.

Here, the role of German communists, socialists, scientists, and cultural figures, many of whom were Jewish, was pivotal in re-establishing and reconfiguring of the transnational anti-fascist movement, and for the global spread of anti-fascism. Like many Italians before them, the German exiles did not start their exile politically or ideologically unprepared. Several of the key activists had concerned themselves with the threat of fascism for years, if not for a whole decade.<sup>8</sup> In the process in March 1933 Paris was transformed into the anti-fascist capital of Europe and the world.<sup>9</sup> One of the key anti-fascist hubs was formed around the so called 'Münzenberg network', which since 1921 had been supported by a large number of intellectuals, socialists and liberals. From Paris it organised some of the most prominent global anti-fascist solidarity campaigns of the 1930s. The German communist Willi Münzenberg was then the leader of the International Workers' Relief organisation (IWR), which was one of the Comintern's most successful international organisations that sought broader unity beyond party divisions. Münzenberg was seen by many as Joseph Goebbels's primary rival in the propaganda war between the Nazis and the political left. Since 1921, from its headquarters in Berlin, the IWR had organised popular international solidarity campaigns for the Soviet Union, and it had mobilised relief to working class victims of major calamities, class conflicts and strikes all around the world. Through its efforts, it had become connected to a global community of left-liberal activists and provided a transnational network and organisational structure to civil society actors who otherwise might not have connected across borders and continents, including the USA, where its headquarters were located in New York City.<sup>10</sup> Thanks especially to the IWR, but also to the International Red Aid (in the US known as the International Labor Defense), many critical connections to intellectuals, artists and sympathisers predated 1933, which in a significant way made the transnational and transatlantic anti-fascist mobilisation much faster and effective.

After 1933, the anti-fascist gateway to America went through New York City. A metropolis made of immigrants, many of whom were now directly affected by and connected to the political events in Europe. As Tyler Anbinder notes in his epic history of immigrant New York, the rise of Mussolini, and Hitler above all, divided New York immigrants. Anbinder argues that Italian and German Americans tended to 'take national pride in the prosperity and respect' that their new fascist leaders had given to their countries.<sup>11</sup> However, the German-Americans or the Italian-Americans were by no means the only groups affected by the fascist menace as Jewish, Austrian, African-American, and later, with the onset of the Spanish Civil War, Spanish communities were directly affected too.

Many on the political left in the US, irrespective of nationality/ethnicity, were nevertheless deeply engaged in opposing every form of fascism. Anti-fascism was also directly related to threats posed by home-grown Nazis and far right groupings. As Cathy Bergin's chapter shows in this volume, it became easy to compare Nazi

racism with US racial laws, Jim Crow and the KKK.<sup>12</sup> In Paris and London, such interpretations of ‘American fascism’ were also repeatedly circulated in the left-wing press. These transatlantic circulations show how German fascism was not only used as a frame for understanding fascism in the USA, but how the unique examples of American fascism helped the anti-fascist movement analyse international fascism and its relation to racism and white supremacy.<sup>13</sup> Besides American far-right movements, openly Nazi organisations were also established in the US. Among the most notorious groups were the Friends of the New Germany (*Bund der Freunde des Neuen Deutschlands*). Originally founded in mid-1933, this was reorganised under Fritz Kuhn’s leadership into the German American Bund (*Amerikanische Volksbund*, generally referred to as ‘the Bund’) in March 1936. US anti-fascism was thus never only about European prospects, but closely connected to an understanding of fascism as an international phenomenon, integrally bound to capitalist society, and crucially present in American society and politics on the national and local level.<sup>14</sup> In the following, I will analyse some of these key issues and campaigns that principally concerned protests against Nazi terror and the mobilisation of aid and solidarity to anti-fascist political prisoners in Germany.

### Solidarity for the victims of German fascism

The first transnational anti-fascist organisation created as a response to Hitler’s rise to power was the World Relief Committee for the Victims of German Fascism (World Relief Committee). This was a direct initiative of the ‘Münzenberg Network’ and was launched in Paris in early April 1933. It had two main missions. Firstly, it sought to mobilise help and helpers for the fight against fascism. Secondly, it aimed to ‘construct a dam’ against the flood of lies coming out of Hitler’s Germany. The aim was to keep world opinion informed and expose the truth about the brown terror in Nazi Germany. Through wide circulation of anti-fascist newspapers, journals, pamphlets and books its intention was to collect and publish facts about political murders, terror, violence and anti-Semitic actions that were denied or downplayed by the German government and its pro-Nazi newspapers. The aim was to document what was actually going on in Nazi Germany and to form alternative news outlets that could influence world opinion.<sup>15</sup>

Nazi officials, just as Franco’s side during the Spanish Civil War, deemed all such efforts as ‘atrocious propaganda’, which today might perhaps best translate as a form of ‘fake news’. Clearly it was not a neutral endeavour, but constituted a critical anti-fascist perspective that sought to see through Nazi propaganda and expose the brutal inner workings of the regime and the Nazi movement.<sup>16</sup> Despite its restrictions, it was the only international organisation created for the purpose to make the Nazis accountable for their actions. It is important to keep in mind that most countries strived to maintain good foreign relations to Germany even after 1933, or at least remain neutral, which in practice meant abstaining from ‘meddling’ in Germany’s domestic affairs, irrespective of how horrific they were. US–German relations were, for example, diplomatically cordial at least during the first two

years, while thereafter the US government increasingly isolated itself from European affairs. Hitler himself, of course, spoke during these years of 'freedom and international peace' while secretly preparing for war and conquest. This led many people to erroneously give his regime the benefit of the doubt, or to accept a wait-and-see mentality.

While the world's official governmental representatives were ambiguous or silent in their public statements on the new Germany, an increasing importance was bestowed to civil society and social movements in the democratic countries. When all German independent, critical news agencies were shut down by the regime, foreign correspondents resident in Berlin and alternative news outlets became even more important as critical and independent sources of information. Among the most critical American voices were such personalities as Edgar A. Mowrer and Dorothy Thompson who both played significant roles in reporting Nazi atrocities. They were also both expelled from Germany due to these activities.<sup>17</sup> The ability to access information from inside the Nazi dictatorship was increasingly difficult and relied largely on clandestine contacts, underground work, and non-governmental networks and independent news outlets willing to sacrifice good relations and publish critical reports for the world to read.

Within days, the World Relief Committee had established separate French, German, and British sections. The French section was supported by intellectuals such as Henri Barbusse, Guston Bergéry, Jean Richard Bloch and Romain Rolland.<sup>18</sup> The British Committee was led by Isabel Brown (Secretary of the IWR's British Section) and Dorothy Woodman (Member of the Labour Party).<sup>19</sup> These three sections would become the central hubs for the world wide struggle to influence public opinion against Hitler. Moreover, long before the popular front, these anti-fascist unity organisations managed to form an embryo of the forthcoming popular front as communists, social democrats and liberals participated in the campaigns and took official posts in the anti-fascist organisations. So, when the first international meeting of the World Relief Committee was held in Paris on 16 April 1933 it was chaired by the British Labour MP, Lord Marley. The honorary presidents were German Nobel Prize winner Albert Einstein and the French professor of physics Paul Langevin.<sup>20</sup> In the US, the so-called *National Committee* was formed through the IWR's American Section. Alfred Wagenknecht functioned as the National Secretary of both US organisations, although they at least officially functioned as separate entities. He was moreover on the National Executive Committee of the American League. Born in Germany in 1881, Wagenknecht emigrated with his parents to the USA as a young boy. Before the First World War he came to have leading positions in the Socialist Party of America and he had been one of the founding figures of the US communist movement in 1919. Wagenknecht was the central contact to both the World Relief Committee in Paris and the CPUSA leadership in New York. He remained a pivotal transnational figure in America until he resigned from both organisations in December 1934 to become the CPUSA's district organiser in St Louis instead. His departure left the

National Committee without its strongest advocate within the CPUSA leadership and thereafter the National Committee and the US section of the IWR also lost much of its significance.<sup>21</sup>

The historically more well-known American League was formed at the 'US Congress against War' held in New York City, 30 September–1 October 1933. Importantly for the chronology of US anti-fascism, the congress in New York was planned and realised first and foremost as a congress against the 'imperialist war danger'. Originally it had been inspired by the Amsterdam anti-war congress of 1932, which had nothing to do with anti-fascism. Following the merger of the Amsterdam anti-war movement with the European anti-fascist congress movement in August 1933, the US Congress against War eventually gave birth to the American League against War and Fascism. As it declared in its manifesto, 'the rapid rise of Fascism is closely related to the increasing war danger', and therefore it subsumed both the anti-war and anti-fascist causes.<sup>22</sup> However, in the process a problematic, or at least confusing, parallelism emerged within the communist camp. There seems to have been a lack of understanding especially among the CPUSA's functionaries and leadership why the National Committee was needed as a separate organisation after the formation of the American League. In an effort to clarify the matter, the CPUSA tried to advise its local leadership that while the American League was the organisation 'for struggle against war and fascism', the National Committee was concerned with 'solidarity support in aid of victims of German fascism and in the campaign for the liberation of [Ernst] Thälmann and all anti-fascist prisoners in Germany'.<sup>23</sup> Organisationally they were completely different animals. For example by March 1934 the National Committee had created committees in 25 American cities, but only half were 'functioning fairly well'.<sup>24</sup> The American League's founding congress had again been attended by 2616 delegates from 35 states, which shows its immediate organisational supremacy in the USA.<sup>25</sup> It moreover launched its own illustrated journal in late November 1933 titled *The Fight against War and Fascism* (generally known as *The Fight*) which provided it with a visually striking platform to distribute its program. It also formed a transatlantic platform as *The Fight* published articles by leading figures from Europe, such as John Strachey, Rajani Palme Dutt, Jennie Lee, Fenner Brockway, Henri Barbusse and Gabrielle Duchene.

A final misfortune for the National Committee was that several local CPUSA leaders had decided to 'liquidate' existing National Committees in order to 'benefit' the establishment of the American League. This was the case in Cleveland, Minneapolis, Los Angeles and Milwaukee where it was felt that there was not enough space for both organisations to operate.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, between May and November 1933 the National Committee remained the primary anti-fascist organisation in the US and based its anti-fascist mobilisation on strong transatlantic connections to Paris and London.

The National Committee in New York first stepped into the public eye through a 'Call to Action' in June 1933 where it specifically depicted the hardship and terror experienced by the German people:

Workers and their leaders are being jailed, tortured and killed. Their families suffer extreme hardship. [...] Pogroms against the Jewish people of Germany and against other national minorities continue in full force, notwithstanding all official denial. [...] All the civil rights granted by the Weimar Constitution have been completely obliterated under the iron heel of Hitler.

The Call narrated the sorrow of the thousands of widows and orphans and families separated from their breadwinners due to the fascist terror. It told of homeless refugees and exiles scattered all over Europe. It declared: 'These victims of German Fascism, people of varying political, cultural and religious views, of various races and nationalities *are in desperate need of help*' (original emphasis). It explained that as long as the Nazis were in power, persecution and atrocities would continue. 'This is the fascist program', it declared. It 'earnestly and urgently' appealed to the American people, 'regardless of race, creed, nationality or political affiliation' to 'form a solid wall of support' for these victims. It was perceived as an opportunity for Americans to join a 'world-wide movement' for the collection of funds and relief in support of the persecuted and exiled.<sup>27</sup> In essence it constituted the broadest possible call to aid and strived for the mobilisation of transnational anti-fascist solidarity and practical relief to anti-fascist refugees and exiles.

Next, an Anti-Fascist Demonstration Day was proclaimed for 24 June 1933. The movement was clearly conscious of the ethnic structure of political activism in New York City and it declared how American, German, Jewish, Hungarian, Italian, Balkan, and workers of other ethnicities were going to march together under the banners of their respective organisations to Union Square. These included besides the National Committee, such organisations as the German Anti-Fascist Action Committee, the Italian United Front for Anti-Fascist Action, the Jewish Workers and Peoples Committee against Fascism and Pogroms, the Hungarian Anti-Fascist League, and the Balkan Anti-Fascist Alliance.<sup>28</sup> They urged all to seize the opportunity to 'strike a blow at Hitler Terror'. The lessons of the past months were clear: the Nazis had inaugurated a 'regime of bloody terror'. In a devastating tone, it was declared how 'all gains made by the German working class through many decades of struggle against the bankers and industrialists' had now been 'wiped out by the Fascist regime'. The trade unions had been sized by the Nazis and 'converted into instruments of exploitation'. Strikes had been outlawed, the workers press had been banned and all workers organisations had been raided and closed down. Hitler had promised salvation, but four months in power had seen him set in motion parades, orgies, bonfires, persecution, and 'Jew-baiting'. Moreover, the fake anti-capitalism advocated earlier by Hitler had finally been exposed: He had openly become 'the tool of the industrialists and bankers', the anti-fascists declared.<sup>29</sup> Although many such calls for solidarity and relief underlined the need to aid the victims of terror in Germany, there still was a stubborn belief in the German working class's ability to rise in resistance. The Nazis had overpowered the German workers, but they had not broken their fighting spirit. It was believed that the German workers were 'gaining momentum', organising, striking and, allegedly



the factories and streets of Germany were 'flooded' with newspapers and leaflets issued by underground militant organisations.<sup>30</sup> In this way they were not aiding helpless victims, but workers who were heroically fighting for their existence.

Reminiscent to something like an anti-fascist pledge the National Committee distributed a roll call where people could declare their opposition to 'Hitler fascism and all it stands for'. An American anti-fascist in 1933 thereby declared:

I hereby sign my name as an opponent of Hitler Fascism and all its barbarism, persecution and torture. I oppose the activities of Hitler agents in this country. I am unalterably opposed to pogroms against Jewish people and against the spread of anti-Semitism. I declare myself in favor of asylum in the United States for political refugees from Germany. I declare myself in favor of boycott of German commodities. I declare myself for the immediate release of the Reichstag fire defendants and of all Hitler prisoners, whether Unionists, Socialists, Pacifists, Christians, Jews, Free Thinkers, Communists, physicians, scientists, educators, attorneys, authors. I declare myself in favor of aiding the victims of Hitler fascism, their orphans and children.<sup>31</sup>

This pledge from summer 1933 included major elements that can be seen as universal to 20th century anti-fascism, including the expressions of international solidarity and the will to give practical aid to all those who are persecuted or victims of fascist terror (irrespective of religion, social background or political conviction), a strong stand against anti-Semitism, and a desire to actively boycott fascist countries. It called for the opening up of US borders to anti-fascist exiles and refugees and framed anti-fascism in strong internationalist terms as well.

### **Socialists, communists and the prospects of an anti-fascist united front**

Although the National Committee never grew into a mass membership organisation, it did forge significant transatlantic connections, especially through organisation of speaking tours by British, French and German anti-fascists in the US. In the other direction, it brought US lawyers and intellectuals to anti-fascist conferences and rallies in Europe. The World Relief Committee's first tour organised in the US was for the Chairman of the World Relief Committee, Lord Marley, Labour MP and Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords. He had been one of the main speakers at a major anti-fascist rally organised at Kingsway Hall in London on 22 January 1934 together with John Strachey and Dorothy Woodman. Shortly afterwards, between 6 and 28 February 1934, Marley gave speeches in 13 US cities, including Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Boston and New York.<sup>32</sup> In New York a special welcome committee had been elected where prominent authors, activists and intellectuals such as John Dewey, Sherwood Andersson, Roger Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, Elmer Rice and Ella Winter provided their support.<sup>33</sup> On arrival Lord Marley also had an official meeting with New York's mayor Fiorello La Guardia. After touring around the

US, Lord Marley was welcomed back in New York City at the Mecca Temple on 24 February for a last 'anti-Hitler' protest rally. The relevance of this transatlantic connection was emphasised by the National Committee as it was advertised as an opportunity to get 'first-hand information on the latest developments in Germany'.<sup>34</sup>

Wagenknecht explained in a confidential letter to Earl Browder, general secretary of the CPUSA, that the aim of the tour had been to 'unify and broaden the united front of organisations for activity against Hitler fascism and its agents in this country, and for the relief of Hitler victims. Secondly, the aim was to involve in our movement as many of the professional elements, the educators, intellectuals, etc., as possible.' Luncheons and banquets with Lord Marley had been organised for liberals and, according to Wagenknecht, they had been generally successful. The public meetings had apparently not all enjoyed mass attendance, although the event in San Francisco stood out as especially successful. However, it seems that its success was not dependent of the CPUSA's support. Wagenknecht noted to Browder that 'in nearly all cities where Lord Marley spoke, the Party gave very little or no cooperation'. As a whole the Lord Marley tour had been able to collect funds and opened up new areas of co-operation between communists, socialist and liberals through their common commitment to fight Hitler.<sup>35</sup>

Ironically, Lord Marley's tour coincided with significant conflict between the CPUSA and the Socialist Party of America. The CPUSA was still acting according to the Comintern's sectarian class-against-class line, but as noted by Fraser O. Ottanelli, it was also a significant transition period with many inherent conflicts, contradictions and ambiguities. Events unfolding in Europe crucially affected the dynamics and character of anti-fascism in the USA. This became painfully clear when the Austrian Social Democrats engaged in a short-lived and unsuccessful armed resistance against the right wing dictatorship headed by Engelbert Dolfuss on 12 February 1934. The Socialist Party of America organised a protest meeting at Madison Square Garden in New York on 16 February 1934, which was attended by 18,000 people. However, instead of joining the anti-fascist demonstration of the Socialist Party, 1,000–2,000 communists under the leadership of Robert Minor and the editor of the CPUSA's newspaper *Daily Worker*, Clarence Hathaway, disrupted the meeting.

Afterwards, in a CPUSA publication, it was explained that the socialist doormen and ushers at the entrance had targeted all communist workers and confiscated all banners and communist literature: Accordingly, the communists claimed that 'the workers coming to the meeting to demonstrate against fascism saw a fascist staring at them at the door. One need not describe their mood once they seated themselves in the hall.'<sup>36</sup> Things escalated rapidly and soon, according to the *New York Times*, 'chairs were flung from the balconies, and screams and shrieks of women, mingled with boos, yells and catcalls, drowned the voices of speakers at the platform'.<sup>37</sup> The gathering more or less ended with the Afro-Caribbean socialist Frank Crosswaith shouting in response to the communist instigated chaos at the Garden that the communists would 'remain pigs because it is the nature of Communists to

be pigs'.<sup>38</sup> Afterwards, even the communists described the outcome as 'regrettable' for the anti-fascist united front but, on the other hand, it had allegedly divulged to all workers that the socialist leaders were indeed 'enemies of the united front', while the common socialist workers had realised the importance of a joint struggle across party lines.<sup>39</sup>

The sectarian attack on their fellow anti-fascists was broadly condemned by the CPUSA's sympathisers, and had direct repercussions on the anti-fascist campaign work. As a result 25 anti-fascists, including John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, John Chamberlain and Anita Brenner signed an open letter that condemned the action: 'This meeting ended in shameful disorder. Instead of working-class unity, factional warfare ruled.' Quoting the *Daily Worker's* earlier remark that 'anyone who splits the ranks of the workers at this time helps the fascists', the signatories stated how they, 'with horror', observed how the communists were 'playing the part against which it itself warned'.<sup>40</sup> The CPUSA's actions also resulted in the resignation of J. B. Mathews, the president of the American League against War and Fascism. He was joined by six other Socialist Party members, who had been part of the League's national executive committee.<sup>41</sup> In its reply the League did not show any understanding as it had not been directly involved in the incident. 'For this reason the League is compelled to consider the reasons given for these resignations pure and simple desertions.' It continued by lambasting that 'a resignation from the League can be justified only on the grounds either that the League no longer adheres to its purpose of fighting against war and fascism, or that the resignee no longer adheres to the purposes of the League'. It naturally argued that it was the latter case, bitterly adding that these people had taken the first chance to abandon the fight and that they lacked 'faith in the masses of workers'.<sup>42</sup>

While the American League was chiefly affected by these events, the National Committee seems to have been spared from larger membership loss and could continue its solidarity work for the victims of fascism. Tellingly, Lord Marley could continue his US tour for the anti-fascist united front, and he carried on supporting the work of the World Relief Committee.

## The Reichstag fire and German political prisoners

February 1934 represented, for different reasons, a watershed moment for the National Committee. Since its foundation it had been fully committed to reporting and defending the communists charged for incinerating the German parliamentary building, the Reichstag, on the night of 27/28 February 1933. It had been used by the Nazi government to stage a major crack-down of German communism. The first person arrested at the scene of the fire was the erratic and confused Marius van der Lubbe who originated from the Netherlands. The government's hunt for alleged communist culprits led to the arrest of the Bulgarian communists Georgi Dimitrov, Blagoy Popov and Vassil Tanev on 9 March 1933 in central Berlin. Soon afterwards, the leader of the KPD's parliamentary group Ernst Torgler was also arrested and charged as a co-conspirator.<sup>43</sup> The trial was set for the German

High Court in Leipzig, but as news about the forthcoming trial spread around the world, it was increasingly called out as an unjust political trial. In the US, International Labor Defense (ILD) had together with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) been fighting prominently against class justice and for the rights of political prisoners for over a decade. Starting with the Sacco and Vanzetti case in the 1920s and the defence of the Scottsboro Boys in the early 1930s, the American left-liberal milieu had a direct understanding of what the Reichstag Trial was all about: a plot against innocent political activists put on trial to strengthen the political position, aims and needs of those in power.<sup>44</sup> As a counter-measure the World Relief Committee organised an International Legal Commission of Inquiry of the Reichstag Fire consisting of lawyers from Europe and the US, including Arthur Garfield Hays, one of the co-founders of the ACLU in 1920 and well-known as one of the defence lawyers for Sacco and Vanzetti. The trial in Leipzig began on 21 September 1933 and continued to captivate the world's attention until its conclusion on 23 December. It ended with the acquittal of the three Bulgarians and Torgler due to 'lack of evidence', while van der Lubbe was sentenced to death and was quickly executed. The others remained imprisoned, leaving the world's public uncertain as to what their final fate would be.<sup>45</sup>

The chief innovation of the Münzenberg Network in Paris had been the launch of a powerful counter-narrative that claimed that the Nazis themselves had burned the Reichstag. The World Relief Committee was responsible for the world famous publication *The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror* (published in English translations in London and New York). Before the beginning of the trial the World Relief Committee organised a counter trial in London in mid-September 1933 where Arthur Garfield Hays functioned as the American representative. When Hays returned to New York, he published a widely circulated protest declaration to the German Federal Court of Justice on 27 November where he opposed the way the process in Leipzig was being handled. The declaration was circulated to all the American contacts of the National Committee. By 15 December the protest resolution had been signed by 250 American intellectuals. The collection of supporters continued and a list of 378 Americans demanding the liberation of Dimitrov, Torgler, Popov and Tanev was published by the World Relief Committee in Paris. These names were further accompanied by 252 French university professors who also joined the international protest movement. Such publications played a crucial role in showing that the American and European public was deeply concerned about the developments in Nazi Germany, and enhanced the establishment of a transatlantic anti-fascist community long before the Italo-Ethiopian war or the Spanish Civil War.<sup>46</sup> As the American League's monthly illustrated journal *The Fight* declared:

This is a situation intolerable to workers and anti-Fascists of the world, whose great champions Dimitrov and his comrades have become. Protests must pour into German consulates as never before! These protests, wherever possible, should be borne with mass demonstrations!<sup>47</sup>

In the end the Bulgarians were all granted citizenship in the USSR and on 27 February 1934 they were quietly put on a plane to Moscow. A cult of personality was constructed around Dimitrov, but after his release the main focus of the global anti-fascist public shifted towards the liberation of the German communist leader Ernst Thälmann who also had been arrested in March 1933.<sup>48</sup> While Thälmann today represents a forgotten cause, the campaign for his release formed a central element of the transatlantic anti-fascist campaign work after the Reichstag Fire campaign. Thälmann was above all constructed into a symbol of the anti-fascist struggle, where his liberation was connected to all other imprisoned anti-fascists, including communists, left-socialist, social democrats, and liberals, and functioned as a symbol of the terror and injustice in the Third Reich. Dimitrov himself was central in producing this shift. He telegraphed the National Committee in June 1934 declaring that 'this fight for Thälmann [...] is [at the] same time [a] fight to save thousands of German political prisoners. [...] this fight will determine our future struggle against Fascism'.<sup>49</sup>

When it came to re-thinking the logics of Comintern sectarianism, the leadership of the German CP was less than helpful. In a letter to the CC of the CPUSA sent on 20 March 1934 it thanked the American communists for their avid anti-fascist mass demonstrations and for protesting against the German 'swastika ambassador' Dr Hans Luther in Washington. The KPD leadership claimed that the American anti-fascist struggle had been well received in Europe and thus 'awakened an enthusiastic echo among the fighting German Comrades of our Party who are unafraid of death'. The American help to liberate Dimitrov, Popov and Tanev was defined as a 'very important element' in the international protest wave. Now, similar efforts for Thälmann were called for, but instead of expecting a broad campaign for his release, the KPD stated that 'we know that in all countries the Social-Fascists are sabotaging the mass struggle for the release of Thälmann. Because they hate Thälmann who has always conducted an untiring principled struggle against social-democracy. [...] The Social-Fascists of all countries will gladly consent to the murder of Thälmann [...]'.<sup>50</sup> In a similar tone Earl Browder described at the CPUSA's party convention in the beginning of April 1934 that the Socialist Party leadership should still be understood as social fascist, and defined them as the main enemy of the communists.<sup>51</sup> In early 1934, instead of unity, the US anti-fascist movement seems to have been in a state of disarray and bitter rivalry.

## Anti-fascist tours in the USA

Under these challenging circumstances the World Relief Committee decided to organise a new campaign tour in the USA in summer 1934. This time, a prominent trio was sent across the Atlantic, consisting of Willi Münzenberg, the German left-socialist and prominent lawyer Kurt Rosenfeld, and the Welsh born Member of Parliament Aneurin Bevan, who was of the British Labour Party's left-wing.<sup>52</sup> Rosenfeld, born in 1877 in Germany to a Jewish family, had acted as Prussian

Minister of Justice in the Weimar Republic. Rosenfeld had extensive experience of political trials as a defence lawyer of socialists and communists in Germany. He had also been a signatory to one of the first international anti-fascist protest letters to Mussolini that publicly demanded an end to the fascist terror in Italy in 1926.<sup>53</sup> Bevan, born in 1897 in a South Wales mining community, had for decades been engaged in trade union work and was also deeply involved in the 1926 British general strike and miners' lockout. In 1929 he was elected into Parliament as a Labour MP. According to his biographer, Bevan was a 'convinced Marxist but never a Communist'. Like many left-socialists Bevan was outraged by the Labour Party Executive's stance taken in the *Democracy versus Dictatorship* resolution that called for the equal condemnation of Nazism and Soviet communism as totalitarian enemies of democracy in March 1933. It was no surprise to him that a united front between the parties was ruled out, but the Labour Party Executive's stance towards all 'auxiliary or subsidiary' organisations was incomprehensible. Bevan had stood together with communists and members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) at demonstrations and rallies, but now the Labour Executive stated that the united front was incompatible with Labour Party membership. In other words, if Bevan took part without the permission of the Labour Party's National Executive in anti-fascist rallies with communists, he could be ousted from the party. Nonetheless, he still joined the World Relief Committee's tour in the USA in summer 1934. Apparently, Bevan's wife Jenny Lee who was a MP for the ILP, and herself a member of the British Relief Committee had persuaded Bevan to finally accept the invitation to travel to the US. It had first been envisaged as a short visit to New York, but had quickly been expanded into a tour spanning across the whole of North America.<sup>54</sup>

Both Rosenfeld and Bevan first appeared at a public hearing of the 'American Legal Commission of Inquiry of the Brown Terror' in New York on 2 and 3 July 1934. The aim of the inquiry was to collect facts about the situation in Germany. During its first session, 38 witnesses were called to give testimony who, according to Rosenfeld, gave a devastating image of the bloody terror in Nazi Germany. Rosenfeld himself acted as witness and told about the collapsing justice system and the installation of the arbitrary 'people's courts' in Germany. Bevan also appeared at the inquiry with reference to his long background in trade union work. According to Rosenfeld, Bevan criticised the German trade unions strongly for not resisting the rise of fascism in any way. The idea behind the Legal Inquiry had been to repeat the success of the London Counter Trial and to fend off, in a formal way, Nazi allegations that the left-liberal critics had a tendency to exaggerate and overplay reports on the terror in Nazi Germany.<sup>55</sup>

For the CPUSA, the star of the World Relief Committee's tour was Münzenberg. A mass meeting was organised on 6 July 1934 at the Madison Square Garden that assembled 16,000 people. There the secretary of the CPUSA, Earl Browder, introduced Münzenberg as a 'member of our heroic German brother party' to the crowd. Münzenberg entered the stage and, according to a report submitted to the Comintern, one second of complete silence followed, until an 'indescribable

jubilation' broke loose and thousands gave a standing ovation to Münzenberg. The crowd started singing the *Internationale*, which further emphasised the inherent internationalism of the moment. Münzenberg spoke in German as it was the only language he mastered. Although the report to the Comintern noted that it was a foreign language for most of the assembled, it seems to have been sufficient that he represented a flesh and blood representative of German communism and the European anti-fascist movement. (Despite such statements, it must be assumed that the audience included representatives of the over 230,000 Germans or 120,000 Austrians resident in New York at the time).<sup>56</sup> Münzenberg informed the assembled New Yorkers about the brutal 'Night of the Long Knives', also known as the Röhm Purge, of 30 June 1934, and the escalating aggressive and hostile stance of Nazi Germany. In his speech, Münzenberg argued that because German fascism was in an ever weaker position and lacked mass support, the more it had to rely on brutality and 'blood and iron'. With the rising levels of terror it was of outmost importance to save Thälmann from the hands of the brutal regime, Münzenberg explained. Such statements provided a new sense of urgency to Thälmann's cause and to the entire anti-fascist mobilisation campaign in the USA.<sup>57</sup>

The rally at Madison Square Garden was concluded with the presentation of an appeal by the National Committee. It required all organisations affiliated to the World Relief Committee to send a minimum of 500 protest telegrams to Hitler. Apparently, the mass meeting in New York resulted in a new wave of campaign activity at the grass roots level in the US, including picketing of the German embassy and consulates around the country. One of the goals, as presented in the CPUSA's newspaper *Daily Worker* on 12 July 1934, was to gather in ten days an 'Ehrenrolle', a sort of honorary list of all organisations in the United States that supported Thälmann's liberation. This list was then to be handed over to Münzenberg on his departure back to Europe, so that the German CP could show to all of its members the achievements of the Americans.<sup>58</sup>

Together with Rosenfeld and Bevan, Münzenberg then commenced their speaking tour. The trio travelled from one mass demonstration to the next, visiting Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Chicago, thereafter Münzenberg returned to New York for some concluding rallies. Bevan and Rosenfeld continued their tour all the way to the West Coast, visiting among others St Louis, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, and Minneapolis.<sup>59</sup> In a typescript preserved among the Kurt Rosenfeld papers in Berlin, he offers an elaborate analysis of his tour experiences. He had then been on the road for two months. It reveals that he also had visited Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg in Canada. Rosenfeld was altogether very impressed by the publicity achieved during the tour. They had been interviewed by local newspapers, and 'objective' reports about the public meetings had been published. Only the Fascists (as described by Rosenfeld), and especially the newspapers closely associated to the German fascists in the US, had been hostile. Rosenfeld was convinced that the meetings had improved the general political atmosphere in the US and Canada, supported the anti-fascist movement, and had advanced the united front. Rosenfeld's detailed account provides a unique

insight into the general mood at the various rallies and meetings. According to Rosenfeld, the composition of the audience reflected directly the political orientation of the local organising committees. In many places the International Labor Defense had organised the meetings, at other places individual communists or socialists. Apparently, the organisers oscillated from pure bourgeois to completely communist committees and meetings. In some cases they were even supported by anti-communist persons and committees. In one location the translator of Rosenfeld's speech had, shortly before the meeting, noted that he had made some 'improvements' to Rosenfeld's manuscript. It turned out that the translator had completely erased the section on Thälmann. The mentioning of Thälmann's name seems to have been an especially sensitive issue and, according to Rosenfeld, it was the best way to measure the political character of the audience. Despite these variations, it seems that the more typical audiences consisted of a mix of various social groups and political orientations.<sup>60</sup>

In Milwaukee, where a large German-American population resided, Münzenberg had been particularly warmly welcomed, and two mass meetings were organised where over 10,000 German and American workers gathered. In New York, Münzenberg was one of the main speakers at a writers' conference held on 26 July 1934, where 100 authors listened in to Münzenberg's plea to the intellectuals to form a united front together with the working class. Münzenberg's aim was to mobilise all intellectuals who still remained 'neutral' to form the strongest possible propaganda for Thälmann's liberation. Münzenberg also addressed a crowd of 500 New York doctors for the formation of an 'intellectuals' committee' in the New York Relief Committee. Moreover, he requested that a delegation of doctors would be dispatched to investigate the medical condition of imprisoned anti-fascists and especially Thälmann. A protest resolution was accepted by the assembled doctors, and an official demand for a delegation of doctors was to be handed over to the German consulate general. It was also proposed that a delegation of lawyers were to be sent to meet Thälmann and to acquaint themselves with the details of his forthcoming trial.

In the meantime, the American League was also preparing the dispatch of a 12–15-person-strong women's delegation for the Women's World Congress against War and Fascism organised 28–30 July 1934 in Paris. The plan was that the women's delegation would continue with a tour of German prisons to inspect the conditions of female anti-fascists.<sup>61</sup> These examples show that a central component of the transatlantic anti-fascist mobilisation was realised through an active exchange of information about the real conditions in Nazi Germany and, where possible, people were sent to inspect the state of affairs in the Third Reich. On their return to the US, they were expected to tour and give public talks about their experiences. One could indeed argue that these efforts formed a mirror image of the Soviet Friendship delegations that Münzenberg through the IWR and Olga Kameneva at the VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) had organised since the 1920s to showcase the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union.<sup>62</sup> Now, on the global anti-fascist movement's initiative the same method was used in reverse to divulge the terror and hardship in the Third Reich.



On Münzenberg's last day in New York, 27 July 1934, together with the Anti-Nazi Federation of New York, the National Committee organised a mass meeting at the Bronx Coliseum. It was conceptualised as a 'Thälmann Day' and functioned as a 'mass anti-fascist rally' and a farewell banquet in honour of Münzenberg. On the cultural side, the program included a performance of 'Set Ernst Thälmann Free' (translated from the German by Anne Bromberger and Frances May) by the Workers' Music League, and a performance of the play 'Free Ernst Thälmann' by the Workers Laboratory Theatre. Greetings were presented, for example, by Euquile McKeithen and Mother Bloor, who both were delegates to the Women's International Congress Against War and Fascism, soon to convene in Paris. Earl Browder of the CPUSA and Münzenberg concluded the event with speeches.<sup>63</sup>

All these events emphasised how the American campaign was an integral part of a worldwide campaign, and how the American experiences, perspectives, and valuable new insights to the campaign could be used to commence the 'Generalangriff' [general attack] on all fronts against German fascism. The Thälmann campaign was therefore seen as a campaign both *producing* and *being produced* by a 'world-wide solidarity' and 'anti-fascist internationalism'. In accordance with the anti-fascist movement's global aspirations, it was stated that Münzenberg's finest accomplishment was that the Thälmann campaign in the USA had been connected to all Thälmann campaigns of the whole world. Those who before Münzenberg's tour had not been a part of this 'great movement', were finally absorbed into it, it was enthusiastically declared in a report by the World Relief Committee.<sup>64</sup>

During the tour Aneurin Bevan had been confronted with the fact that the National Committee had been much more influenced by the communists than the British Relief Committee. Unfortunately, no detailed account of Bevan's impressions have been found. What we do know is that when Bevan returned to Britain he attended the Labour Party Conference at Southport in October 1934. There he expressed his fury at the Labour Party's decision to blacklist the World Relief Committee as a communist front organisation, which clearly indicates Bevan's positive stance towards its anti-fascist mission. In a counter to the party leadership, he questioned their authority to restrict what organisations and committees members were permitted to associate with. Bevan concluded his speech in Southport: 'If you are going to expel a man from this Party merely because he meets [Louis] Gibarti, or [Willi] Münzenberg, or talks to Harry Pollitt [...] then this Party will get itself laughed out of court.' Unsurprisingly, the conference voted to prohibit just the kinds of anti-fascist activities that Bevan had been engaged in.<sup>65</sup> The Labour Party's stance against anti-fascist collaboration also limited the potential that the British Labour Party's anti-fascism could play on the global stage. In due course, such important figures as Bevan, Dorothy Woodman and Lord Marley were all forced to resign from their official positions in the aforementioned anti-fascist organisations.

The tours to the USA did not cease, however, and the World Relief Committee dispatched the German proletarian composer Hanns Eisler, who was a close associate to Bertolt Brecht, on a concert tour in the US. His travels between March

and May 1935 took him from the East to the West Coast, and according to a report sent to the Comintern, he performed at 25 major and 150 smaller meetings. Many of the meetings had been attended by Germans or German-Americans, but apparently several of them had attracted an assorted crowd of anti-fascists. When Eisler arrived to New York a special 'Eisler welcome committee' had been formed of 32 famous American anti-fascist intellectuals and artists, including the composers Georg Gershwin, Aaron Copland and Louis Gruenberg, and the authors Michael Gold, Edward Dahlberg and Josephine Herbst. Gold was a Jewish American writer and communist, and at the time editor-in-chief of the New York based illustrated journal *New Masses*. Dahlberg had visited Germany in 1933 where he penned critical articles about the Third Reich for the London *Times*. In 1934 he had published the novel *Those Who Perish*, which has been described as the first American anti-Nazi novel. Josephine Herbst would later, in 1936, author an anti-fascist survey of Nazi Germany titled *Behind the Swastika* (published by the Anti-Nazi Federation in New York). Moreover, 14 proletarian cultural and fighting organisations had signed up to the Eisler welcome committee. To the Comintern it was reported that the most memorable rally was organised at the Mecca Temple on 2 March 1935 where 4,000 anti-fascists had gathered.<sup>66</sup> Overall the World Relief Committee assessed that the tour had constituted a 'great cultural political success'.<sup>67</sup> Eisler's example reveals that the anti-fascist alliance between liberals and the left was, despite continuous party sectarianism, finding ways to encourage anti-fascist unity through alternative practices and cultural encounters.

## Conclusions

Despite the many calls for his liberation, Thälmann's incarceration continued for over a decade. In the end, he was moved to the Buchenwald concentration camp where in 1944 he was executed by the Nazis. Ironically, he would outlive several of the anti-fascists campaigning for his release, including Barbusse (1935), Müntzenberg (1940) and Rosenfeld (1943). However, many of the anti-fascist practices developed especially by the World Relief Committee and the National Committee during these first crucial years after the Nazi seizure of power continued after the dissolution of the National Committee in 1935. Here the American League was especially important in staging energetic solidarity and protest campaigns as well as maintaining transatlantic anti-fascist networks that transferred knowledge about terror and atrocities committed in Nazi Germany, Austria, Italy, Ethiopia and Spain. Thälmann's imprisonment and fate was shared by innumerable anti-fascists in fascist prisons and concentration camps whose life stories and victimhood was powerfully brought to the attention of the global public thanks to the World Relief Committee and other anti-fascist organisations, activists and reporters.

This chapter has shown that the transatlantic anti-fascist solidarity networks managed already in summer 1933 to inspire local activism across the US which was crucial for raising awareness of the fascist danger and why it had to be opposed. Still, the time period investigated here was filled with contradictions and

ambiguities. It shows the presence of serious efforts to unite people against fascism, but it also reveals how the anti-fascist agenda was severely muddled by the communists. Equally important was the omnipresence of a significant fear among non-communists that anti-fascism was merely used as a manoeuvre by the communists, that the communist-led calls for unity were disingenuous or not based on an actual will to fight fascism.

Yet documents discussed earlier, such as the 'Roll Call' published in summer 1933 by the National Committee, seem to tell a different kind of story that is clearly linked to the radical roots of the US civil rights movement. They show that there were indeed solemn attempts to form broad coalitions in the fight against fascism when devastating news about pogroms, terror and political violence started pouring out of Nazi Germany: In the face of this brutal fascist dictatorship, the protection of civil rights and the safeguarding of all victims of fascism irrespective of their 'race, creed, nationality or political affiliation' became the foremost mission of the global anti-fascist movement. In a significant way it directed the anti-fascist movement's full focus to the international threat posed by Nazism which re-defined anti-fascism as anti-Nazism in the US. Still Nazism was consistently defined as 'German fascism', not losing touch with the fact that it constituted a part of an international fascist movement, variously present in different societies across the Atlantic, but sharing the same distinct oppressive, anti-democratic nature. The transatlantic anti-fascist bond after 1933 was based on this common realisation and the shared will to offer relief to the victims to fascism in Germany and to aid all those who were willing to resist its spread globally.

## Notes

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- 19 IAH report, Paris, 1 April 1933, RGASPI 495/30/937, 3.
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- 24 Wagenknecht to Earl Browder; 20 April 1934, RGASPI 515/1/3696, 9–10.
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- 26 Wagenknecht to Brown, 19 November 1934, RGASPI 515/1/3700, 72.
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- 28 All Out – Union Sq., New York, 24 June 1933, RGASPI 538/2/98, 120.
- 29 Strike a blow at Hitler Terror, June 1933, RGASPI 538/2/98, 120 (backside).

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- 36 Sam Peazner, 'Austria and Madison Square Garden', *The New Order*, No. 2, March 1934, pp. 4, 9. The number of people in the audience is according to the ACLU investigation published shortly afterwards. See *ACLU Report of Commission of Inquiry to the Board of Directors on Madison Square Garden Mass Meeting, February 16, 1934* (March 1934), reprinted in Bernard K. Johnpoll (ed.), *A Documentary History of the Communist Party of the United States*, Vol. III (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 5–20.
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  - 60 Akademie der Künste, Kurt Rosenfeld Archiv, Folder 6, 1–9.
  - 61 American League against War and Fascism, 14 April 1934, RGASPI 515/1/3700, 5; Bericht des Welthilfskomitees, RGASPI 495/30/1058, 44–46.
  - 62 See Micheal David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
  - 63 Thälmann Day, Bronx Coliseum, 27 July 1934, RGASPI 538/2/98, 114.
  - 64 Bericht des Welthilfskomitees, RGASPI 495/30/1058, 43, 46.
  - 65 Foot, *Aneurin Bevan*, pp. 172–176.
  - 66 Bericht über den Organisationsstand und die Aktionen des Welthilfskomitês für die Opfer des Hitlerfaschismus im Verlauf des letzten halben Jahres, 27 May 1935, RGASPI 495/30/1058, 15–25, here 21.
  - 67 ‘Millionen singer seine Lider – Millionen verstehen ihn’; Paris, 25 March 1935, RGASPI 495/30/1059, 6.

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